



Text messages support co-parenting

The challenge

Fewer than half of the children in the United States live with two, married, biological parents. Indeed, the majority of parents live apart from their child's other biological parent and are co-parenting from separate locations. Co-parenting happens for a variety of reasons, including divorce, parents who never married or lived together, incarceration, military deployment, or other job situations.

Parenting across two households or locations introduces challenges for parents and children. For instance, children often feel disconnected from a parent, can be stuck in the middle of adult arguments, and may struggle with inconsistent rules and routines. While hostile co-parenting can be harmful to children, co-parenting that is positive and well-communicated has been linked to beneficial outcomes for both parents and children.

In Wisconsin, state statutes give judges the right to mandate that parents attend a co-parenting class; these courses are typically short, 3-8 hour workshops with little follow-up. University of Wisconsin-Extension Family Living Educators have been providing co-parenting education for more than 20 years, and they recognized that effectively teaching and learning complex skills such as positive co-parenting in just a few hours is a challenge. Digital technology can help separated families stay connected. When parents use technology and digital media in a positive way, both

parents and children benefit. Research shows that positive parenting skills can be learned and technology can enhance the learning.

Response

Acknowledging that technology plays an ever-increasing role in how families interact, UW-Extension Family Living county educators and state specialists developed a new text messaging series titled *eParenting®: Co-Parenting* to help parents learn positive co-parenting methods. Text messages are a low-cost communication method with potential to reach a high number of adults. (Nearly all American adults under the age of 64 have cell phones and access to text messages.)

The *eParenting®: Co-Parenting* text messages were developed to supplement classroom co-parenting education and extend the duration co-parents are engaged in relevant child development topics. The text messages also address how digital media can be used to enhance parenting skills and build a secure connection between children and all their parents and caregivers. The texts each include a brief topic introduction followed by a short URL link to connect the parents to a full *eParenting®: Co-Parenting* article online (<http://fyi.uwex.edu/eparenting/category/coparenting/>).

In a pilot from May 2016 to January 2017, the *eParenting®: Co-Parenting* text messages were delivered to 406 parents from twelve Wisconsin counties. Participants were recruited from 707 parents completing face-to-

“Finding unique ways to reach out to our families is crucial; the texting pilot has found a system to offer support to a high volume of parents quickly.”

—Family Court Services Program Coordinator, Fond du Lac County

Family Living Programs Impact Report

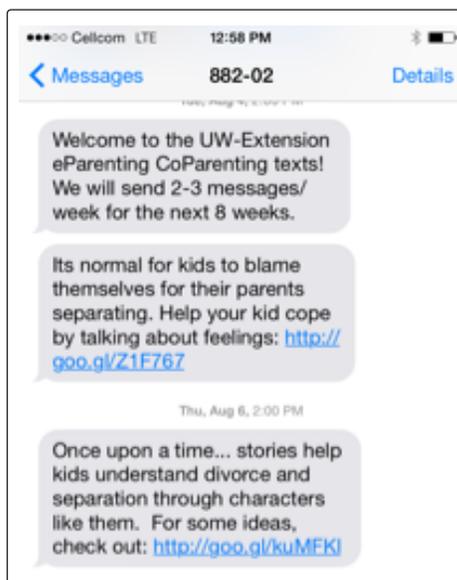
face classroom co-parenting education. Two-thirds (57%) of the invited parents signed up to receive the texts. Participants received between 2 and 4 text messages per week totaling 26 text messages over eight weeks.

Results

Participants provided feedback through eight questions texted over the course of the pilot and a Qualtrics questionnaire sent via text to participants at the end of the pilot.

Benefits to parents

Parents agreed that because of these text messages they were making a greater effort to cooperate with their co-parent, were less likely to make negative remarks about their co-parent, and were incorporating digital media more positively into their co-parenting. Eighty-six percent of the parents indicated that they learned new ways that digital media and technology helps support child development. The majority (95%) of these parents also learned a new parenting idea or skill because of receiving these text messages.



These findings were further supported by the results of the final online questionnaire. For instance, 86% of parents said the text messages helped them remember and practice what they had learned in face-to-face class. Over two-thirds (71%) of the parents also reported sharing the text messages with others.

While the questionnaire responses tell the strongest story about the impact of the *eParenting*®: *Co-Parenting* texts, two additional measures suggest that parents remained engaged in the project even if they did not provide feedback. First, parents were given the option to cancel receiving the text messages at any time after they signed up; only 10% (40 parents) cancelled. Secondly, the number of clicks on the URL links included in each text were tracked and the results show that 16%–33% of parents clicked the link in the text to learn additional information.

Despite robust recruitment and retention, we continue to consider barriers to access. Only 7% of parents invited to participate reported that they did not have a phone with access to the Internet. Therefore, texting access and Internet access (via phone) does not appear to be a significant barrier. However, “texting fees” and “no smart phone” were listed as reasons parents decided not to participate. To better assess this possible barrier, a future pilot study is underway allowing parents to choose delivery via email as an alternate option to cell phone text message. Another possible limitation is that our target audience of co-parents is affiliated with the court system. Yet we know others co-parent due to employment challenges or deployment. Considering how best to reach these families would strengthen this work.

• • •

Today most children in the United States have parents living in separate locations. The *eParenting*®: *Co-Parenting* text messaging program has the potential to reach the parents of these children in an efficient and effective way. Initial pilot results show that the text messages can increase parents’ knowledge and use of digital media and provide developmentally appropriate strategies for co-parents of infants to teens.

To learn more, contact:

Renee Koenig

renee.koenig@ces.uwex.edu, or

Anne Clarkson

anne.clarkson@ces.uwex.edu

Family Living Programs’ *eParenting*®: *Co-Parenting Team*

Anne Clarkson, Mary Huser, Renee Koenig, Kevin Murphy, Peggy Nordgren